

Lobbyists ready themselves for legislative session

Anne Knowles, 1/14/2013

In three weeks the 77th Regular Session of the Nevada Legislature begins and the state capital will once again host a swarm of lawmakers, citizens, reporters and, maybe most of all, lobbyists.

About 250 lobbyists have already registered for the session, and about half of them were in the legislative building in Carson City last week for a now mandatory two-hour training class which covers everything from ethics to fire exits to filing required monthly expense reports on time.

But all of them were already busy meeting with clients, legislators and one another to prepare for the upcoming session and continue work they've been doing since the last time the Legislature convened. The spotlight may be on every other year for a few months, but lobbying is a year-round, full-time profession.

"The session is the high-profile, high-activity period of time," says Nicole Willis-Grimes, director of public affairs with The Ferraro Group in Reno, which represents Saint Mary's Regional Medical Center, Dacole Company and Las Vegas Limousines among other businesses. "But in the interim there is a lot of regulatory work. We're hired for the relationship we have with people and for ongoing monitoring."

That includes representing clients' interest as bills passed during session are forged into regulations as well as tracking candidates, both to advise larger clients on whom to support during election campaigns and for building rapport with individuals those clients may need in the future.

"I spend time meeting new candidates who may not even become a legislator," says Jeanette Belz of J.K. Belz & Associates Inc. in Reno, which represents Liberty Mutual Insurance Group, Nevada Academy of Ophthalmology and Nevada Psychiatric Association among others. "I don't know if they'll be elected or who they might affect, whether they'll benefit one client or another."

That's why, in part, most lobbyists work on monthly retainer rather than billable hours, with expenses calculated in, and often sign one- to two-year all-inclusive contracts that usually turn into long-term relationships.

Each contract is unique and retainers vary depending on the amount of a work a client requires, including the most difficult task, what lobbyists uniformly call "heavy lifting."

"Getting legislation passed is heavy lifting," says Lesley Pittman, president of Sierra Strategies in Reno, which represents Station Casinos Inc., Reno Diagnostic Centers, United Way of Southern Nevada and others. "It is much harder to get something passed than to kill it, especially if it is controversial or goes against public opinion."

But even just keeping tabs on a few bills or issues can quickly turn into a time-consuming headache.

"Right now there are 883 bill draft requests and 1,500 bills on average in each session," says Chris Ferrari, president of Ferrari Public Affairs, a Reno firm that works with ValueOptions, Corrections Corporation of America and Alliance Trust Co. among others. "A bill that could start out as innocuous could become a problem for someone as amended." Clients are found in a number of ways, say lobbyists. Starting out, lobbyists use their lobbying skills to develop a clientele.

“I came to Nevada in 1995 to work as the president of the hospital association, and I worked for a lobbyist for two years before starting out on my own,” says Belz. “I had no clients so I started by going to every meeting I could think of and making sure people knew I was available. I was at an interim committee meeting on electrical deregulation and met someone sitting in the audience. That’s how I got my first contract.”

Large, well-established firms such as The Ferraro Group, run by longtime lobbyists Greg Ferraro and Bob Ostrovsky, and R&R Partners, headed by well-known Nevada lobbyist Billy Vassiliadis, need no introduction. Many lobbyists find clients through referrals from other lobbyists who are approached by a potential client whose interests are in conflict with a business or group they already represent.

“When you get to be the size of our company, you run into conflicts a lot,” says Mike Draper, director of government and public affairs in Nevada with R&R Partners, which has offices in Washington, D.C., Denver, Los Angeles and elsewhere as well as Reno and Las Vegas. “If a client is in an industry we already represent, either we don’t take that client or we go to our existing client and see if we can work together.”

Working together to build consensus is a key part of the job, say lobbyists.

“Depending on the issue or the industry, we work hard to find other businesses or industries that have same concern and we form coalitions,” says Misty Grinner, senior public affairs with The Ferraro Group. Coalition-building may be easier in Nevada, where a relatively small group of lobbyists, both paid and unpaid, know one another and have ready access to members of the citizen legislature. But that presents problems, too, especially with the turnover necessitated by term limits.

“These are average Joes, from all walks of life, and it’s unfair to expect them to be experts on all sorts of policies and issues,” says Draper. “Lobbying has become ability to disseminate info to legislators. Lobbying has evolved and some of the stereotypes of the business are not nearly as accurate as they used to be.”

“Lobbying or lobbyist is a dirty word, but the absolute most important piece of lobbying is your credibility,” says Draper. “Credibility is your most important asset.”

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